



# **Catholic Faith, Life & Creed**

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on  
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

## **Breaking Open the Word**

by Mary Birmingham

## **The Solemnity of Christ the King | Year C**



Gebhard Fugel, 1863-1939 Illustration from the Siysky Gospel



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

### Divine Praises of Saint Francis

You are holy, Lord, the only God,  
and your deeds are wonderful.  
You are strong; you are great,  
you are the Most High,  
you are the almighty King.  
You, holy Father, are King  
of the heaven and earth.  
You are Three and One,  
God above all gods.  
You are good, all good, supreme good,  
Lord God, living and true.  
You are love; You are wisdom,  
You are humility; You are endurance,  
You are beauty; You are gentleness,  
You are security; You are rest,  
You are joy; You are our hope and happiness,  
You are justice and moderation,  
You are all our riches,  
You are beauty; You are gentleness,  
You are our protector,  
You are our guardian and defender.  
You are strength,  
You are consolation,  
You are our hope; You are our faith,  
You are our charity,  
You are all our sweetness,  
You are our eternal life,  
great and admirable Lord,  
God almighty, merciful Savior.

Catholic  
**Faith, Life  
& Creed**  
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## Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Gospels of these weeks culminate in today's liturgy—proclamation of Jesus' crucifixion and his promise of everlasting life given to the good thief, albeit to all of us.
- ▶ The journey has led every believer to the foot of the cross—the place every Christian must ultimately end up.
- ▶ In this last day of the liturgical cycle we contemplate God's ultimate act of salvation—the death and resurrection of his only Son.
- ▶ We will not hear the story of Christ from Luke's perspective for another two years. We enter a new liturgical year next week in which the Christ event will be told from the perspective of St. Matthew.
- ▶ The feast of the Solemnity of Christ the King is called an idea feast.
- ▶ It recalls the feast of Ascension, Epiphany and Palm Sunday—all feasts that exalt Christ in his sovereign Kingship.
- ▶ Pope Pius XI instituted this feast in his Encyclical Letter *Quas primas*, Dec.11, 1925. It was in response to the destructive evils of the time. He insisted that only the sovereignty of Christ's Lordship and Kingship over the world was a force powerful enough to overcome such evil and destruction.
- ▶ "...It is necessary that the royal dignity of Our Lord be recognized and accepted as widely as possible. To this end it seems to Us that nothing else would help so effectively as the institution of a special feast dedicated to Christ our King. The annual celebration of the sacred mysteries is more effective in informing people about the Faith and in bringing them the joys of the spiritual life than the solemn pronouncements of the teaching Church. Documents are often read only by a few learned men; feasts move and teach all the faithful. The former speaks but once; the latter every year and forever. The former bring a saving touch to the intellect; the latter influence not only the mind but the heart and man's whole nature."<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ The world was experiencing the emergence of fascism, and the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. The Church lost its political power and the immorality of the twenties was rampant.
- ▶ This feast was eventually moved to the last Sunday of the liturgical year.
- ▶ The focus addresses the theology of eschatology—last things, end times, eternal life and anticipation of Christ's return.
- ▶ The liturgy of Christ the King upholds Christ's universal reign and Lordship not just evident in today's liturgy but celebrated in every Eucharistic liturgy.
- ▶ There are consonant themes at the end of the liturgical year with the beginning of the new year. Both the ending and the beginning exalt the Christ who is Lord of the Universe and who reigns as Lord and King of the world and who will one day return to take us all home to be with him forever in eternity.

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<sup>1</sup>AAS 17 (1925), 593-610. In Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1979), 177.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

## First Reading: 2 Samuel 5:1-3

- ▶ King David captures the Biblical imagination of every Jewish person that ever lived.
- ▶ David was the great and glorious king of Israel. Today's liturgy tells of his humble origin as king.
- ▶ David was a humble shepherd boy. He possessed special gifts known only to God.
- ▶ David was a sinner like all other sinners. Yet in spite of his failings he would become an icon in the memories of Jewish people of their splendid history.
- ▶ No other king in the history of the Israelite people could compare with King David.
- ▶ As hopes for a future messiah emerged it is no wonder that the future king would be referred to as the Son of David. David was the ultimate king.
- ▶ What is expressed in today's reading from second Samuel is the royal ideology ascribed to by the Davidic court that underscored the notion that the king was the sacramental presence of God in the midst of the people.
- ▶ The king is lord of the people and is simultaneously in union with them.
- ▶ The image of king as loving shepherd and ruler of the people is a primary image of kingship in Old Testament literature.
- ▶ There is an opposing understanding of kingship in the Old Testament in which the concept of an earthly king runs the risk of usurping God's sovereignty.
- ▶ People who were of the anti-king mindset believed that earthly kingship ran counter to the concept of God's ultimate rule of Israel and thus risked tyranny.
- ▶ Israel was no stranger to rule of tyrant kings.
- ▶ David is a figure that foreshadows the future Christ, King and Messiah.
- ▶ God chose David from among Jesse's sons. The choice of David was a complete and utter surprise.
- ▶ God chose David but Israel had to also accept his authority and leadership.
- ▶ The leaders of Israel did accept David. He demonstrated great prowess as a leader, a shepherd of the people and a commander of forces.
- ▶ David united the people under his rule.
- ▶ His monarchy would become a symbol for all time of a unified monarchy and people.
- ▶ From this symbol of hope would emerge the dream of the future messiah.
- ▶ The future Messiah would unite all nations under the Christ, the Son of David.
- ▶ Jesus, descended from the house of David would one day be the realization of Israel's hope for a Messiah/King.
- ▶ David was king of Israel; Jesus was king of the universe.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ How is this a relevant word for believers today?
- ▶ What does the choice of David say to us about how God deals with human beings?
- ▶ Is there a person you know who at first glance would surprise you to be in a position of authority or leadership, but who in the end rose to the challenge?
- ▶ What if God chose you for a huge responsibility—to lead many people? How would you respond?
- ▶ What do you consider to be qualities of great leadership?
- ▶ In what way does he convict you to be a better disciple?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about our relationship with God?

### Second Reading: Colossians 1 12:20

- ▶ Scholars refer to today's reading from Colossians as one of the greatest cosmic and Christological hymns in the New Testament.
- ▶ Today's pericope exalts the pre-existent Christ who was present at the creation of the world.
- ▶ Christ continues to create, re-create and protect his creation by the power of his Spirit.
- ▶ The second part of the pericope speaks of Christ's redemptive works of salvation—his incarnation, his saving death on the cross, his resurrection and ascension and finally the establishment of the Church by the power of his Spirit.
- ▶ The early church juxtaposed the wisdom literature of the Old Testament as a reference to Christ. Jesus was regarded the incarnation of wisdom itself.
- ▶ Jesus even referred to himself in such terms [Lk. 11:49].
- ▶ Jesus, the wisdom of God created and recreates and redeems the world.
- ▶ The cosmology inherent in this reading served as an apologetic making it possible for Greek Christians to counteract the gnostic belief that human beings needed to be saved *from* creation. Christ not only redeemed humanity he redeems all creation for his purposes.
- ▶ Christ, the Redeemer was not only present in the act of redemption at the creation of the world; he was the principle actor in his ultimate work of redemption at Calvary.



- ▶ Today's pericope on the Solemnity of Christ the King exalts the pre-existent Christ who as God's eternal Son created the heaven and the earth and ultimately became incarnated as God's Son and upon his ascension reigns as ruler of the universe from the Father's right hand.



## Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ In what way, if any, is this letter a relevant letter today?
- ▶ In what way does this text challenge you to be a better disciple?
- ▶ What does Christ's kingship have to do with your life of discipleship?
- ▶ What should be the Christian community's response to the cosmic, pre-existent Lord of the Universe? How can we make this a personal word today for us as believers? In other words, in what does this reading challenge our everyday lives?
- ▶ What attitude or posture or behavior in you does this reading challenge?

### Gospel: Luke 23: 35-43

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

### Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ We are transported from the cosmic exaltation of the pre-existent Christ in the second reading to the sober irony in the Gospel. We speak of Christ's kingship, yet his throne in this scene is the cross and his subject is none other than a thief who is sentenced to die by his side.
- ▶ The thief proclaimed him king and Lord in his request to remember him in the heavenly kingdom he was about to enter.
- ▶ The ultimate paradox of this Calvary scene lies in the inscription on the cross that read *King of the Jews*. His detractors understood it as mockery; his believers proclaimed it as their undeniable truth—a truth upon which they were willing to stake their lives.
- ▶ It is interesting to note that Pilate put the inscription on the cross after he had already pronounced him guilty of the charge. Scholars have suggested possible reasons. Perhaps he would one day need to defend himself against the charge that

he too easily placated the crowd. It is also possible he wanted to curry favor with the Jewish leaders. It is also possible that he did it as a future deterrent to zealots who might be tempted to test their prowess. You want to be king? This is what happens to those who think they dare try!

- ▶ Sarcasm and mockery notwithstanding, Pilate had absolutely no sense of the profound truth he tacked to that saving cross. Jesus truly was and is the universal king of the Jews, the world, the universe and of our hearts.
- ▶ While there is little reference in Luke's Gospel to Jesus as king, his kingdom was highlighted frequently. It was to be a kingdom not built on earthly paradigms.
- ▶ Jesus' kingdom will have the cross as its throne.
- ▶ Jesus' kingdom will understand weakness as strength.
- ▶ Luke refers to those who stood by watching the event. Luke used the word *theoria* that meant contemplation. He invites the reader to place himself or herself as one among those who stood by contemplating the events at hand.
- ▶ Would we be among those who stood by contemplating the events at hand? Would we have stood with Christ? Would we have called for his death or cried out for his release? Would we have stood with the good thief or the bad thief?
- ▶ The scene is dripping in irony. Those who hurled insulting, mocking accusations of Jesus' kingship were in fact proclaiming the ultimate truth. God used the words of his adversaries to testify to his true identity—he was and is indeed the Messiah and chosen one of God!
- ▶ The Jewish leaders were the most culpable accusers. The soldiers were simply carrying out orders as they did at every execution.
- ▶ The Jewish leaders, the soldiers and one thief mocked and accused. One thief repented and the people contemplated what they witnessed.
- ▶ The thief called Jesus by name, a familiarity that was uncommon. Perhaps he was appealing to the hope inherent in the meaning of Jesus' name (*God saves*).
- ▶ The thief was asking that the living God in his midst remember him in the kingdom he would soon be entering.
- ▶ The thief was aware of his own sinfulness, yet similarly aware of God's mercy.
- ▶ The thief repented of his sins and trusted in God's mercy.
- ▶ Jesus' promised him his eternal reward.
- ▶ Death was the door to eternal salvation for the good thief.
- ▶ Death is the door to eternal salvation for all faithful believers.
- ▶ God's love and mercy is available to sinners eternally. There is never a moment when God does not offer his love, healing and forgiveness. There is never a time that salvation is not offered to each and every one of us. Salvation, forgiveness and redemption always precede our request for it. Believers need only graciously accept the salvation, forgiveness and redemption that were always available.
- ▶ The thief accepted it; today was the day he decided for Christ. It was his moment of decision.
- ▶ When did we similarly accept the salvation, forgiveness and redemption that were always available to us?



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ In what way is this a relevant word for us today?
- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ When did you become aware of the salvation, forgiveness and redemption that were always available to you? What evidence is there in your life that you have accepted it?
- ▶ What evidence is there in the life of the community that your community has accepted it?
- ▶ What evidence is there that growth is needed—that you have not yet fully accepted God's forgiveness, salvation and redemption?
- ▶ What are the implications of this gospel?
- ▶ Put yourself in the place of the good thief. You are dying, you acknowledge that you are a sinner and that Jesus is the Messiah—what would you want to say to Jesus besides asking him to remember you as he remembered the good thief?
- ▶ If Jesus died on the cross for our salvation and he in turns invites us to do what he did for the ongoing redemption of the world, for whom are you called to carry the cross in your life?
- ▶ In what way have you carried the cross for others in your own life?
- ▶ What does this story teach us about God's relationship with us?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

### CONCLUDING PRAYER

Prayer of St. Ambrose

Let us pray,

Carry me, Christ,

on the Cross,

which is salvation to the wanderers,

sole rest for the wearied,

wherein alone is life for those who die.

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97



## APPENDIX

#1. God works in marvelous ways. Early in my adult life I was very shy. I had been so touched by the wonderful Christian teachers, catechists and evangelists that had passed on the faith to me that I prayed that God gift me with their zeal and the ability to proclaim the Good News.

Like David, I was an unlikely candidate. Yet slowly, over the years, people pointed out specific gifts that they saw emerge in me. One person in particular invited me to be part of a group that I deemed way beyond my pay grade. She told me that she saw gifts in me that needed to be nurtured and she felt that God was calling her to do the nurturing—and nurture she did!

We never know when God might be calling us to leadership. David did not seek that distinction, but he humbly accepted it and in the process became not only a great king, but a great, legendary king as well. All kings would pale in comparison. His monarchy would foreshadow and create dreams of the future and ultimate King of the Universe.

When God calls us, he knows what gifts we have to get the job done. To say no is to say no to the one who gave us the gifts in the first place. Not a wise thing to do! It is, in fact, the height of arrogance.

#2. The cosmological second reading humbles me to the core of my being. It reminds me that Jesus is God—God who always was and always will be. It brings me squarely into his divinity. The human, suffering Christ of the Gospel touches my humanity. The cosmological Christ transcends humanity and helps us glimpse at the divine and at what awaits us.

The second reading reminds me that Jesus is indeed Lord of the universe. No evil, no division, no animosity, no scandal, no political machinations, no warring nation has power over Christ, the Lord and King of the world. When the world seems to be spiraling out of control and crumbling before our/my eyes it is tempting to despair and question God's presence and action in the midst of it all.

This month marks yet another anniversary of 9/11. Our nation is remembering the horror of that day and those who lost their lives. I am remembering my daughter and the grace we experienced that her life was spared. She boarded the last train out of the World Trade Center. The fuselage of the second airplane landed on the roof of her apartment building. It was in imminent danger of collapse. Her life, however, was spared.

Three days later I stood at ground zero--directly in front of my daughter's home, directly in front of the rubble. I wept for the senseless destruction and loss of life. I begged Christ to tell me where he was and why he allowed the horror before us. The longer I stood there, the more the image of a new Calvary stuck in my consciousness. The cross of Christ loomed large in the twisted steel before us.

Evil had its way on that fateful day, but it would not have the last word. Hope reigned eternal. Calls for peace were heard on every New York street corner. People were transfixed in intimate embrace, desperately seeking human tenderness in the face of such denigration.

Faith tells us that God was with those who died and that he ushered them into his eternal kingdom. Faith tells us that God was with the families who grieved the loss of their loved ones. This feast reminds us/me that despite seeming evidence to the contrary, God is sovereign over the created order. Scripture passage after Scripture passage reminds us that Christ is Lord of all the nations; they bow down before him.

Today's reading reminds me to believe in that promise and no matter how bleak the world situation becomes—no matter how many 9/11's we have yet to endure, Christ reigns from his eternal throne and reminds us that no matter what we endure in this world, it is transitory. Suffering is merely a nano-second when held up against the promise of eternal salvation.

#3. Every time I embrace the cross in my life, offer it up, and join it to Christ's suffering for the ongoing redemption of the world, I participate in his sacrificial death and resurrection.

I have learned a great deal about the paradox of the cross by striving each day to live with a loved one with a debilitating, life-destroying illness. I have learned that love is a decision. If God can love me in my arrogance, and contrariness, then I can do no less than offer unconditional love to one who is often times very difficult to love. When I offer up the sorrow of watching the future of an extremely intelligent young person wither before me, I am tempted to lose hope and wonder about God's plan for his life—an extremely tormented life.

Yet the paradox of the cross, the salvation it offers, the faith it requires of me reminds me that there is hope and that salvation does rise like a phoenix out of the ashes of despair. I simply must relinquish control and watch God's saving power unfold before me.

So many times I have seen God's hand lead us through the devastating years of this journey. There are times that God is silent and I am called to remember when he wasn't. The cross, however, is my hope. When situations seem hopeless and lead me to the brink of despair I remember that I can find meaning in suffering and offer hope to those who have no hope. The cross is my anchor. I thank God for its power in my life. Without it I would not survive the day-to-day struggle.



## Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's  
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Jesus Christ  
Kingdom of God  
Heaven, Hell and Purgatory  
Salvation

Creed  
Cross/Paschal Mystery  
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

### **JESUS CHRIST**

Today is a perfect feast for focusing our attention on the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, Jesus, the Son of God. Thus, the feast of Christ the King logically invites reflection on what the Church teaches us about JESUS CHRIST.

### **KINGDOM OF GOD**

Jesus came to establish his kingdom on earth as we await his kingdom in heaven. This feast remembers the exalted king of the universe who reigns from his heavenly throne. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches us about the kingdom he came to establish. Thus today's doctrinal session will focus on the KINGDOM OF GOD.

### **ESCHATOLOGY, END TIMES, HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY**

Today's liturgy leads us to reflect on what Jesus promised the good thief—eternal life, paradise, heaven, hell and purgatory. It is thus most appropriate as the Church year ends with this feast of Christ the Lord and King of the Universe, that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about ESCHATOLOGY, END TIMES, HEAVEN, and HELL AND PURGATORY.

### **CROSS/PASCHAL MYSTERY**

Today is a most appropriate occasion to focus our attention on the Cross of Christ and the Paschal Mystery that celebrates his life, his mission, his passion, death and resurrection, his ascension to the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit to the world. Our focus today will be the CROSS OF CHRIST AND PASCHAL MYSTERY

## **SALVATION**

Today's liturgy is a testament to the salvation God has given to his children. He gifts us with eternal life through the power of Christ's death and resurrection and today's liturgy reminds us that each day we are to be prepared for the culmination of that salvation in our lives. The readings today express the Kingship of Christ who reigns from his heavenly throne. We are invited into intimate relationship with the God who continues his ongoing work of salvation in the world. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about SALVATION.

## **CREED**

Today's liturgy affirms our belief in the Christ event. Christ's salvific resurrection from the dead, and our own overall belief in the afterlife. Such beliefs are foundational Christian truths and as such are proclaimed in the Creed we profess every Sunday in the Eucharistic Liturgy. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the CREED.

## **EUCCHARIST SERIES:**

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part \_\_\_\_ of the Eucharistic Series.